



# TRING PARK SCHOOL FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Growth mindset review

Report on review visit conducted on Tuesday 9th October 2018

Chris Hildrew  
Churchill Academy & Sixth Form

# Tring Park: growth mindset review

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## Context

I was invited to work with Tring Park by Dr Anu Mahesh, Deputy Director of Academic Studies, alongside the Growth Mindset Working Party, following a one-day course I delivered on developing a growth mindset approach in June 2017. I have visited Tring Park three times to deliver training and work with the staff: firstly, in September 2017, then again in January and April 2018. The sessions have been planned to inform and empower staff at Tring Park to take ownership of the theory behind growth mindset in order to implement the approach in their own specialised context.

The review visit in October 2018 was an opportunity to see the school at work, meet with staff and learners, and review progress made in implementing a growth mindset culture. I met initially with senior staff to discuss outcomes and get an overview of the journey so far. This was followed during the rest of the day by three learner panels: Junior Learners, Lower Sixth, and Third Year Sixth. The rest of the day was spent observing teaching and learning in a variety of academic and vocational lessons across the curriculum and age range. I visited twelve lessons in all. The visit concluded with verbal feedback to senior staff and governors, including the Principal.

## The journey so far

The most noticeable shift in the school's culture over the past year is in the adoption of a new core values statement: *Inspiring Excellence, Creativity & Resilience in a nurturing community*. This statement captures the elite performance aspects of the school's purpose alongside a clear emphasis on the "whole child." It is clear from discussions with staff throughout my contact with Tring Park that the staff care deeply about the children not just as performers, but as individuals. Indeed, part of the school's rationale for working with me over the last year is to improve wellbeing and ensure that learners who are so driven, with such ability and such ambition, pursue their goals without sacrificing their mental health and wellbeing on the altar of the perfect performance.

I reviewed several policy papers from the Dance Department before my visit. The team has moved away from giving marks to junior learners following assessments, as evaluation of the process showed that the young dancers were too fixated on the mark and not on what it represented. Marked assessments have been replaced with a traffic light system: Red; this is developing, Amber; this is improving, Green; this is secure. In reviewing the pilot of this approach, staff reported (with some surprise!) that the children really liked not having the stress of 'who came first and who came last'. The 15-19 age group has a different system: they receive marks for technical skill but these have been halved, with the other 50% now being awarded for attitudes and approaches to learning. This approach chimes with the evidence on effective feedback, which suggests that the best feedback should cause thinking rather than an emotional reaction: it should focus the learner on the next steps they need to take, rather than their position in the class. I understand that the attitude to learning emphasis has also been adopted more widely across the academic and vocational curriculum.

## Growth mindset review: key questions

Within the review, I was interested in finding out the following:

- To what extent does the high performance culture of Tring Park encourage competitive learning goals or communal learning goals?<sup>1</sup>
- What kinds of feedback do learners receive, and how do they respond to this feedback?
- How do learners experience and respond to challenge in learning?
- What are the similarities and differences between academic and vocational experiences at Tring Park?

This approach would help me to review the overarching question: to what extent is Tring Park becoming a growth mindset school?

### Competitive or communal learning goals?

One of my concerns in such an elite environment was that the learners would be fixated on their position within the class, focused on hierarchy and being “the best.” This was not the case. Learners were focused on being “the best that I can be” (Third Form student) – it did not matter how good you were compared to others. Lower Sixth students explained further: “you just need to work on your own development...some parts will be right for you, others won’t. Not getting a part doesn’t mean you’re no good, it just means you weren’t right for that part” (Lower Sixth student). They were keen to tell me that Daisy Ridley never got a main part whilst she was at Tring Park, and that doesn’t seem to have held her back!

Learners were able to give plentiful examples of learning from one another: one young dancer described struggling with turns in second, and seeking out a classmate who could do it in order to get coaching from him in order to improve after class. I was able to see this within a modern dance class, where learners observed and coached one another to improve a stretch they were working on. They were able to articulate to one another – and to me – exactly what they were aiming for and what they each needed to work on to make it better. A similar group critique was observed in a singing class. Critique was received positively, even welcomed, as it helped to improve performance.

In particular, amongst the junior student panel, there was astonishment at the thought that they would be in competition with one another. Amongst the older learners, there was more of an understanding that this was the nature of the industry that they were being trained to enter, but still within the learning environment there was a palpable sense of community and togetherness: “you feel you belong” (junior student panel). Fifth Form GCSE Drama students within their lesson were working collaboratively to devise their performance pieces: they were able to critique one another’s ideas constructively, focusing on the content not the person, with a clear sense that they were developing the work as a shared enterprise rather than for any one individual to shine. Similarly, within A-level Chemistry, learners were not afraid to admit mistakes or misunderstandings, and peers were able to correct misconceptions for one another positively and constructively.

In one English lesson, learners were conducting a mock trial of Macbeth. The scenario in this lesson was artificially competitive: the defence and the prosecution were locked in fierce debate to convict

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<sup>1</sup> “learners are often more motivated and successful when classroom activities involve cooperative rather than competitive or individualistic goals.” Dweck, Walton, Cohen, *Academic Tenacity* (Gates Foundation, 2014)

or exonerate Macbeth over the responsibility for his actions. Even within this environment, the overarching learning aim – a deeper understanding of character and the requirement to use evidence from the play to support arguments made – was a shared and communal goal, and the competitive element was harnessed in service of that goal.

The Third Year Sixth dancers, who are actually competing for jobs within the industry, understood the nature of the dance world and, in the formation of a dance company, shared a communal creative goal in preparing for their tour.

## Feedback

The common language used by learners across Tring Park was that of “corrections.” For them, this forms the backbone of the lived feedback experience. “Corrections” were common across vocational and academic disciplines; the junior students, especially, saw this as a unifying factor across the academic and vocational curriculum. Learners really valued corrections as they helped them make progress. Their value was underscored by the expertise of the adult supplying them. One example in the junior student panel came from a singer trying to reach the lower register of her voice: the teacher’s expertise was such that the technique corrections led to rapid progress. Repeated experiences like this – where the correction unlocks improved performance – reinforce the value of the feedback and encourage the learners to look for it and to look forward to it, because they know they will make better progress as a result.

Learners were aware of the marks they received, and valued them. However, they valued the feedback more. “You look forward to the mark [because it’s nice to know when you’ve done well], but you look forward to the feedback too [because that’s how you get better]” (Junior student). Older learners valued the tutorial system where they received verbal feedback on their progress, not just in their studies but in terms of their personal development. Lower Sixth students cited weekly interviews in their acting course, which they found beneficial as an opportunity to pick apart the specific areas to work on. The use of notebooks to keep track of corrections in Dance was also mentioned and observed, and this places a concrete value on the feedback – the notebook is not for keeping score of marks, but for tracking feedback and progress.

Lower Sixth students also referred to the “Star of the week” recognition, which they were very positive about because it was awarded for approaches and attitudes to learning and school, rather than for raw talent or achievement within the curriculum. They cited an example of a learner who had been awarded “Star of the week” for an act of kindness; this reinforced the key elements of the action plan which was to increase the emphasis for Tring Park students on their attitudes and approaches to learning, as well as on the excellence of their performance. On this evidence, this is becoming embedded and is valued and warmly appreciated by the learners.

Within lesson observations, feedback across disciplines was targeted, immediate, and expert. Academic and vocational staff were able to identify errors or areas for improvement and act almost within the instant to offer corrections. As a result, progress was clear, both to me as an observer but also, more importantly, to the learner. This level of “in-flight” feedback is a key enabler of a growth mindset, because learners are able to direct their efforts into purposeful practice and see the rewards of progress as a result. It is only possible to provide such instantaneous targeted feedback when the class is led by a teacher with expert levels of subject knowledge, and this was self-evident in every learning experience I observed.

Lower Sixth students especially spoke of the value of candid feedback within the vocational curriculum: they expect honest critique, and they are finely attuned to when feedback is unfairly harsh or dishonestly gentle. They don't want feedback sugar-coating: they want to know what they did well and what to work on next. All the learners look up to the staff as subject experts who know what they are talking about – they know that work ethic and consistency is valued *almost* as much as talent and ability in the casting process.

## Challenge

All learners were able to describe specific experiences of challenge, and of positive responses to those challenges. Junior students spoke of the advantages of small class sizes and the willingness of staff to “go the extra mile” to ensure that learners who were struggling got the help they needed to overcome the difficulty. Learning support was mentioned more than once in very positive terms; one Lower Sixth student described how one-to-one support helped her with difficulties related to dyslexia and allowed her to achieve beyond what she thought she was capable of. “You get that push...it's a vibe here” (First Form student). “If you work hard, you will get better...I enjoy the hard work. It's boring if it's easy” (Lower Sixth student).

Third Year Sixth students were very clear about the challenge of the route they had chosen. They had been dancing since they were pre-schoolers, and absolutely recognised that their ballet would never be perfect. Within the lesson I observed, progress in terms of improved performance was clear and evident even to my untrained eye. The dancers recognised that incremental progress is the norm – once one thing is addressed, there is *always* something else to work on. They seemed well attuned to the fact that they were on a journey as dancers without an end point, always improving, always with a next step to take – excellence is achievable, but perfection is not.

## Academic and vocational

The division between academic and vocational appears to become more pronounced for the older learners. Junior students spoke about how their vocational drive transferred to their academic performance. Several students spoke about choosing Tring Park because of its academic reputation, and the confidence that they would have a strong academic education alongside their vocational training seemed a significant point for many of them. However, it was clear that they would all rather be dancing or singing than in a classroom, given the choice! Fourth Form Geography students asked repeatedly “is this on the test?” indicating that their focus and attention was extrinsically motivated by the result they wanted to achieve, rather than an inherent interest in the content; in contrast, Fifth Form drama students seemed intrinsically motivated to create a moving, meaningful performance which just happened to count towards their GCSE.

Third Year Sixth students spoke of the relief of being free of their A-levels so they could focus on their ballet, but this is not unique to Tring Park – after thirteen years of school, it's a rare student indeed who does not breathe a sigh of relief when they can finally close their textbook. Lower Sixth students were far more engaged and enthused when talking about their acting, commercial music or dance experiences than they were their academics; junior students were much more balanced in this regard.

Classroom observations supported this to an extent: although engagement and commitment was high in all lessons I saw, there was a real sense of purpose in the vocational lessons which comes from the fact that this is what the young people are at Tring Park to do: to learn how to perform.

However, in terms of developing a growth mindset it was clear that there was much in common across the disciplines. Within an English lesson, learners were working on a short story of their own. This had been preceded by an earlier drafted story with specific feedback, mirroring the *Austin's Butterfly*<sup>2</sup> approach to developing excellence through repeated drafting and kind, specific and helpful feedback. This kind of purposeful practice was also evident in a singing lesson, where a young man was receiving peer critique on an early draft of his performance of 'Telly' from *Matilda*, and in modern dance where the class was continuing to refine warm-up stretches after weeks of work on the same routine – and continuing to make progress.

## A growth mindset at Tring Park

I saw plentiful evidence of a growth mindset at Tring Park during my day, and precious little fixed mindset thinking. All learners immediately talked about learning as a journey: they were not striving for perfection; rather, they were all striving for “better.” Even the older learners, increasingly gripped by the competitive nature of auditioning, were very clear that the only way to improve their chances of being successful in the process was to listen to the feedback and work on their own performance, academically and vocationally.

Vital to this culture appears to be the common thread of “corrections.” Some staff mentioned that this was something they were looking to move away from. I would urge caution on this: “corrections” are widely understood by learners of all ages at Tring Park; they cross over from vocational to academic; they provide an opportunity to give specific and helpful feedback; and the learners see them as instrumental to their progress.

The Third Year Sixth students were able to describe a shift in the school's culture over the last year, with a greater emphasis on attitude and approach alongside the technical excellence that has always remained a priority. They spoke very positively about this shift, and saw it as a significant improvement. They stressed the importance of focusing on performance alongside technical skill as early as possible. Lower Sixth students – some of whom had only been at Tring for five weeks – recognised the value of this. They appreciated that learning at Tring is demanding, with a very rapid pace of teaching in academic studies and considerable stretch and challenge in the vocational sphere. This was really valued: they recognised that, through the challenge, they were making rapid progress.

The youngest students looked up to the older ones with something akin to reverence. They talked about how the shows and performances gave them something to aspire to, creating a long-term goal. They talked about how their confidence had grown over their time at Tring Park: they felt the time and effort they put in, academically or vocationally, was recognised and praised. They were very clear that it was their focus and approach which would lead to progress. As one young dancer said: “if I decide I want to achieve something, this school will give me the platform to go ahead and do it.”

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<sup>2</sup> *Austin's Butterfly* is a training video released by Ron Berger for Expeditionary Learning at EL Education here: <https://vimeo.com/38247060>

## Next steps

It is clear that Tring Park has already made significant progress towards embedding a growth mindset ethos. I would make the following recommendations:

- Look for opportunities for the academic and vocational teaching staff to share approaches. A common approach to “corrections”, for example, would provide a consistent feedback experience for learners across disciplines.
- Continue to emphasise attitude and approach to learning alongside technical excellence. The young people appreciate this emphasis, and it is encouraging them to work on those areas and improve them: they value the recognition of staff when they have put the effort in. Could the attitudes to learning trialled in Dance have equivalences across disciplines?
- Continue to focus learners on next steps following assessments, rather than fixating on scores or outcomes. The emphasis on each event as a learning experience is something that is helping the young people to keep a healthy balance and focus on incremental improvement.
- Consider using students as learning ambassadors: your learners are truly remarkable, and have much to offer one another. The Third Year Sixth dancers wanted to offer advice to their twelve-year-old selves: “you have more time than you think. Enjoy it. And remember the best performance you’ll give isn’t always the one with the best technique – it’s the one with the best *performance*.” Using older students as learning or attitude coaches for younger ones may be a way to harness this enthusiasm and experience.

## Conclusion

My overriding conclusion from spending the day at Tring Park is that it is the subject knowledge expertise of your staff which is the enabling factor for a growth mindset at your school. They are so expert in their subjects that they are able to provide specific, detailed and focused feedback in the moment of learning, which unlocks progress in the young people. This is coupled to a deep and tangible passion for their own area of expertise which engages and holds the learners rapt. This is equally true for academic as well as vocational staff, who have much more in common than they might realise.

I would like to thank all the staff and the wonderful young people for making me so welcome at Tring Park. It was genuinely a privilege to spend time in the school, to witness such expert teaching, and to see the boundless potential of young people flourishing in such a nurturing environment. I look forward to you continuing your journey towards becoming a growth mindset school.

Chris Hildrew, 13 October 2018